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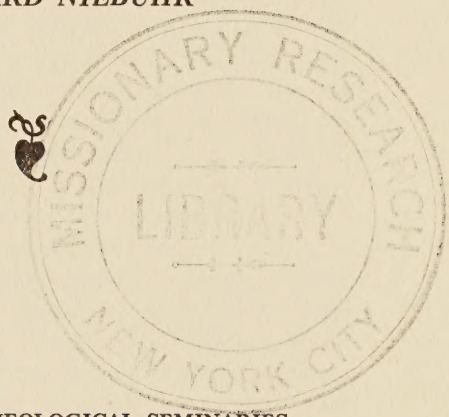
MORAL RELATIVISM AND THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC

H. RICHARD NIEBUHR



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MORAL RELATIVISM AND THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC

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THE theory that morality in its principles and precepts is quite dependent on the social conditions and public opinion of any given time and place is an ancient doctrine which has achieved new significance today because of the extent of its influence on the democratic mass. Moral relativism seems to be the inevitable product of every age in which the stale cake of custom has been broken by new experiences; hence it has appeared in the wake of great wars, of migrations, colonizations and of improvements in the means of communication. It is itself a relative phenomenon—no less a fashion, surely, and no less a product of public opinion than the absolutisms it condemns.

Yet to accuse moral relativism of being itself a relative doctrine is not so much to answer as to illustrate its contention. Its rise as a theory is the reflection of its development as a fact in the actual history of morals. Historically relativism appears as one movement in that inevitable rhythm between innovation and conservation, between emancipation and discipline which is the characteristic of all organic and spiritual life, and, perhaps, the necessary dialectic of progress. In theory it arises as the complement and antithesis of absolutism, and as the fruit of that empiricism which must ever be opposed to an equally necessary rationalism in the polar interaction in which creative thinking moves.

Its value lies in its evident truth; its error in its equally evident failure to comprehend the whole truth —a statement which with equal right may be made of absolutist ethics also. Relativism is really not so much a theory as a report of experience. It is strongly entrenched in modern times not only because of the justification it supplies to the strongly individualistic and naturalistic motives of conduct newly released from the bonds of Catholic and Puritan discipline, and not only because of the casual experience of varying systems of morality which the new communication has brought to the masses, but also because of the descriptive accounts of morality offered by the social sciences. That there is a fashion in morals, that economic and social conditions are responsible for considerable variation in what men honor as good or right, that the standards which we apply at any time to the ethical measurement of past periods are themselves highly relative to our own situation, all of these facts have been made patent by disinterested inquiry into social codes. And social psychology has gone beyond its sister sciences in showing that not only the content but also the form of conscience may be something less than an absolute datum—a derivative from the social life rather than a category of practical reason.

Nor is it possible to safeguard the ethics of Christianity against the disintegrating action of this "acid of modernity." The farther historical research is pushed, the more closely the relation of the church and the religious ethic of any period to the remaining elements in the culture is scrutinized, the more relative the content of its moral teaching is revealed to be. Industrialism and the social gospel, Capitalism and Puritanism, Feu-

dalism and Catholic ethics, have arisen in close interaction and have mutually conditioned each other. The history of the term "Kingdom of God" as an ethical ideal shows the profound modification of the content of Christian ethics by social situations. Not even the ethic of Jesus seems to be free from such relativity, for was it not propounded against the background of revolutionary political conditions or of an eschatological world-view? Was it not shot through and through with ideals and counsels pertinent enough within the simple economy of agricultural Galilee but not so evidently designed for the complex conditions of social life in an impersonal industrial civilization? And what shall be said of the Christian ethic in general as opposed to the ethics of non-Christian religions? It appears to be relative to the whole Western culture which it has nurtured but by whose various non-religious interests it has also been modified and interpreted. The representatives of Christianity, furthermore, seem unable to take an unbiased position in comparing their ethical system with that of other religions. The very standards to which they must appeal in comparing the ethical codes of Buddhism or Mohammedanism with their own are standards which have grown out of Christianity and so are themselves relative. Whether the common standard which is to serve as a yardstick for the comparative measurement of Eastern and Christian ethics is the Christian ideal of love or some humanistic pattern of social welfare or some philosophical determination of the essence of the moral life—the standard is in every case a product, directly or indirectly, of Christianity. Kantian and positivistic ethics alike are the products of a rationalism, which, despite its claims to universalism,

is a definitely Western rationalism, and one which has been formed to a great extent by the influence of Western religion. The source of the idea of progress, Western rather than human as it is, was Hebrew prophecy, and the values of personality which seem so evident to even the non-religious West, may owe their parentage to Christianity more than to human experience in general.

II

Faced with the practical problems which these considerations force upon him what honest and truth-loving position can the Christian, as missionary, teacher, preacher, or parent take? He may, knowing how great are the values which he has found in his faith and how imperative is its moral counsel, be tempted to assert dogmatically the absolute superiority of his religious and ethical heritage, contending that Christianity is revelation while all other religions are merely human aspirations and that the Chrisitian ethic is absolute while all other moral systems are relative. Accepting such a position, however, he will need to be content if other religions make a similar claim, and he will with difficulty defend his inevitable selection from all that has passed for Christianity against the charge that this selection is itself relative. In the end, as in the beginning, his position will rest upon a pure dogmatism. Such dogmatism will gain converts at home and abroad, for confident assertion is always psychologically effective on a great number of people whatever be its intellectual and moral disabilities. It may be an expression of faith and its repristination in modern theology is to be welcomed insofar as it is such an expression. Yet it remains a dogmatism which meets the problems

of relativism, whether in the sphere of religion or of ethics, only by denying them.

A second way of meeting the problem is that chosen by Christian rationalism which seeks for the absolute within the relative by distinguishing the rational from the empirical or from the traditional and thereupon proceeding to define the relation of Christian ethics to this rational absolute, whether the latter be defined as the categorical imperative, happiness or social welfare. Such a procedure has great value in furnishing a critical principle for the examination of that large mass of ethical precepts which constitutes the Christian ethic of any period and in providing for the systematic development of this content. But it does not escape the suspicion of relativism, as we have seen, and, furthermore, it is likely, as in the parallel case of "natural and revealed theology," to diminish the content of the Christian morality by neglecting those elements which do not agree with the rationalist principle.

There are elements of value in both of these ways of dealing with the problem of relativism, but these elements will need to be included in a more empirical and broader attitude toward the subject than they alone provide for. The theory and the practical attitude of Christian ethics face to face with the facts and the temptations of relativism will need to embody within themselves not only the relative truth of moral relativism but also the truth-elements in these absolutisms.

III

In the first place it seems necessary that Christian ethics should recognize the truth of relativism by resisting the temptation of making an absolute principle,

valid for all times and places, out of such insights into principle as come to it under the pressure of new conditions. Furthermore, the truth in relativism makes it necessary to undertake the task of criticizing all our current interpretations of the Christian ethic in order that the purely cultural and Western influences may be distinguished from the original Christian content. Historical inquiry furnishes the best method for the accomplishment of this task. The distinction between the original and the accretions can never be completely made, for all our selections and interpretations must be made from the point of view of our own time; yet the critical task may be partly successful and it will enable the Christian missionary and teacher to present Christianity apart from its unholy alliance with civilization.

Such critical processes, however, only raise, they do not answer, the ultimate question raised by relativism—the question whether there is present within the acknowledgedly relative code of any particular period an absolute element. The historical method tends to regard the teaching of Jesus as representing this absolute element, yet the charge of relativism may be made against this teaching also as is done by the eschatological school. If relativism is conceded at one point must it not be conceded all the way? If it is recognized that some elements in a moral code are due to purely temporary social conditions, must it not be acknowledged that all morality is relative? To argue in this fashion is to worship that "Demon of the Absolute" which ever leads philosophy and theology to their nemesis.

The Christian ethic, which has always been proclaimed as the absolute ethics of the will of God, not relative to

Jew or Greek, is under no compulsion to give up the claims which it has made to unswerving loyalty and universal validity because it must be formulated in relative terminology and applied to changing conditions. To say that there are relative elements in the Christian ethic, even in the New Testament formulation, is not to say that the Christian ethic is relative. The absolute within the relative comes to appearance at two points—in the absolute obligation of an individual or a society to follow its highest insights, and in the element of revelation of ultimate reality.

One might conceivably concede that the Christian ethic is not universally valid, that the failure of a Mohammedan or an atheist to recognize its claims may be justifiable from his point of view. Even such a concession would not impair the obligation of the Christian to obey that will of God which, from his point of view, lays absolute obligation upon him. The obligation of the Christian to follow the Christian ethics does not arise, first of all, from the fact that Christianity is the universally valid religion but from the fact that he is a Christian, whether as the result of religious experience or as a result of his commitment to Christianity by an act of faith. His best insight and his greatest good are not made less valid for him by the fact that others fail to share his point of view. He is, indeed, as an honest man, compelled to criticize his partialities and to recognize his limitations, but his obligation to follow what he has found true remains undiminished. There is a fateful and an obligatory element present in the very point of view which an individual or a society occupies not by choice but by fate. One who is born into a Christian society must needs share something of the Christian

point of view. In a very real sense of the term "Christ is his fate." The viewpoint which is imposed upon him by his birth at this point of history and under these particular conditions is not only a limitation but also an opportunity for discovery, not only a confinement to a relative insight but also an obligation to make the best of his insight. The absolute within the relative appears in this wise in no different fashion to societies and cultures than it does to individuals.

Yet Christianity is not confined to this last attempt to fortify by argument its experience of an absolute element within the relative. It has the right to claim that its experience of the will of God is not only obligatory in form but also in content; that its claim to absoluteness does not rest only upon the character of human experience but also on the character of reality; that goodness does not depend upon human judgment but on the pattern of existence, or the will of God. The discovery of the absolute within the relative is the discovery of the real within the apparent, of the permanent character in changing relations. The discovery of this pattern of ultimate goodness has been the practical interest of that long process of trial and error which is set forth in the ethical experiments of all ages and races. The differences between these experiments give rise to the theory and practice of relativism, but the similarities are just as striking and testify to the absolute element present in the ethical life of man. The supreme intuition and revelation of that absolute element, the Christian maintains, is given in the life and teaching of Jesus. The verification of that revelation is to be sought in the experience of those individuals and societies whose lives are governed by this insight,

and in the deductions to be drawn from the moral experiences of humanity outside of Christianity. The large agreements which exist between the empirical ethics of modern times and the ethics of the great world-religions on the one hand and the Christian teaching on the other, point to a common underlying factor, the "will of God," to which men must needs adjust themselves for the attainment of their highest blessing.

All attempts to define this absolute factor will necessarily be incomplete, and all definitions will perforce be partly relative; but incomplete experience of the absolutely good is not experience of the incompletely good, nor is relatively true definition of moral reality a definition of a relatively moral reality.

Finally, of course, it is true that such conviction of the actuality of the holy, moral, loving will of God involves a large measure of faith. Verification remains incomplete. For Jesus upon the cross the only verification was a final daring act of trust; Paul staked everything on the verification offered by the resurrection of Christ. We are not free from the same necessity of trust in the actuality of God's love. But the trust is not blind trust; it is supported by the moral experience of the race. And in it at least and alone our moral and religious relativism must yield to the affirmation of the absolute.

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